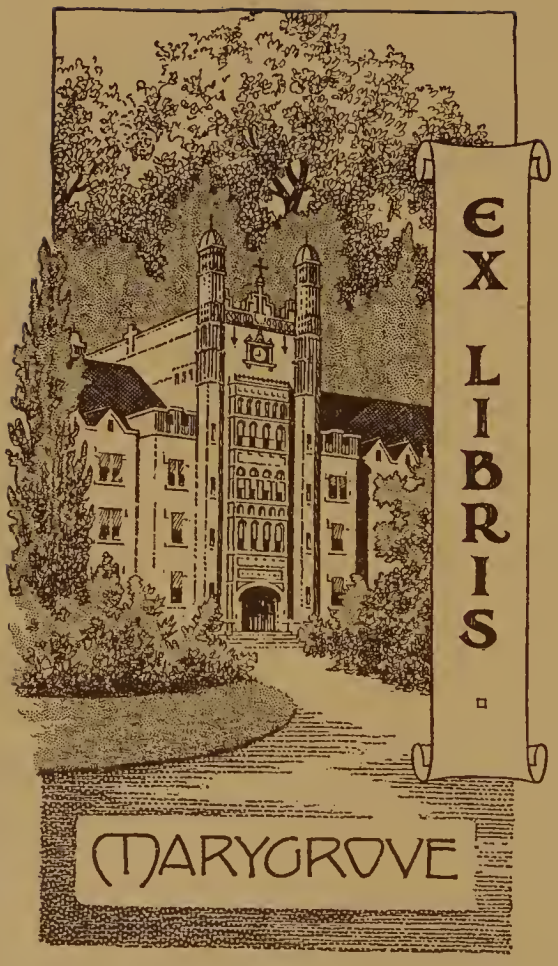
# THE CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST

E. CAMMAERTS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# THE CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST

THE VIRGIN AND CHILD

BY GIOVANNI BELLINI

*Photo by Alinari*

*(Brera, Milan)*

*Frontispiece*

*The Childhood of Christ*

# THE CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST

*As seen by the Primitive Masters*

BY

EMILE CAMMAERTS

WITH FOURTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

THERE is, in our living-room, an old chest containing some photographs of much older pictures brought back years ago from Italy. Around this chest we gather, every Sunday, my children, my wife, and myself, each of us holding a different picture, representing some episode of the life of Christ.

After reading the few verses which inspired the artists, we talk together, trying to imagine what really did happen, and how near or how far from the truth may be the various pictures which we have before us.

These quiet talks are not Bible lessons; it was quite by chance that we began them. They are done without any preparation, each of us contributing his or her small share of remarks and suggestions. The method may be criticized, but the children like it, because they feel, no doubt, that they are brought closer to the sacred story when holding in their hands some concrete image and being able to see as well as to hear.

It has been suggested to me that other small children, and even the big children some of us still happily remain, might derive pleasure and benefit from our Sunday talks, and I have endeavoured, in this first volume on the Childhood of Christ, to outline briefly some of the results which we have achieved.

It would have been, no doubt, more entertaining to record fully our conversation, but, as this conversation is apt to wander from the point, the result might have proved disappointing or at least incongruous. It is not always easy to fix the attention of

children on the same subject, and to limit the scope of their inexhaustible curiosity and inquisitiveness. I have been, therefore, reluctantly compelled to condense the matter of each subject within a few pages, with the hope that, if any parents use this book as a means of teaching their children, some interesting remarks will be made, and with the comforting thought that I, at least, shall not be obliged to answer them.

Having explained so far the origin of this small work, I need not apologize for the want of knowledge displayed, no doubt, almost on every page. No attempt has been made to contribute, in any way, to the work of Bible criticism undertaken by so many learned and inspired teachers; neither do we pretend to any special knowledge of the pictures used as illustrations.

We took the Gospel text as it stands, and the pictures as we found them, contenting ourselves with placing them side by side and with drawing some general and obvious conclusions.

With regard to the choice of the pictures, it is not mine, but the children's. They had in their hands a varied collection, ranging from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, but, in the course of time, they were naturally allowed to choose those which they preferred, and seem to have gradually developed a special liking for the art of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. If you asked them why, they would, no doubt, tell you that Giotto's angels are " really angels," while Raphael's are " merely children with wings," and that Giotto's Christ is "really God," while Raphael's is " merely a man." In case this should not satisfy the reader, I may perhaps be allowed to point out that the painters and sculptors of this early period kept very close to the text, and to the simple traditions connected with it, painting the episodes as they believed they occurred, without letting their imagination wander far afield. I might also add that these artists were more concerned with

teaching the Faith than with displaying their talent, and that the faithful representations of the Gospel scenes were for them the aim, not the pretext. But these are merely a grown-up's clumsy suggestions, which are of small value compared with the sure instinct of a child's faith.

This little work would never have been written but for the stimulating eagerness of my small collaborators. It would, no doubt, never have been published but for the kind spirit in which the S.P.C.K. received my suggestion. It is for the public to decide whether it should be completed by the publication, in the same spirit and on the same plan, of a second volume on Jesus' Active Life, and of a third on His Passion.

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# CHAPTER I

# ANNUNCIATION OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

## CHAPTER I

### *ANNUNCIATION OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST*

THIS is the story of the annunciation of the nativity of St. John, called the Baptist to distinguish him from St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. The Gospel story, as told by the old painters and sculptors, usually begins with the annunciation of the nativity of Christ, and the story of St. John the Baptist is treated separately. We here follow St. Luke, who tells us of the nativity of St. John, before speaking of the nativity of Christ, because St. John precedes Christ and prepares the way for Him. St. Luke wants us to understand the importance of St. John's mission, and how God sent the child to Zacharias and Elisabeth in order that he should straighten the path for the coming of Christ. Such preparation was all the more necessary because men, at that time, had fallen into sin and had turned away from God. They could not have seen Him if a great Prophet had not awakened their conscience. St. John urged repentance, Christ gave forgiveness. Jesus said of St. John that no man born of a woman was greater than he (Matt. xi. 11), and the old masters, when representing their vision of Christ enthroned in heaven, almost always placed the Virgin on His right hand and St. John on His left.

" There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias . . . and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God. . . . And they had no child . . . and they both were now well stricken in years." Zacharias and Elisabeth seem to have been chosen, not only because they " walked

in all the commandments and ordinances of God blameless," so that they would bring up the child in the same faith, but also because they had been praying for a very long time to have a child. They had grown so old that they had given up hope.

The birth of St. John was the reward of their virtue and faithfulness. We must not forget that, for the Jews, not to have children was considered a disgrace. It is told—not in the Gospel, but in legends written at a later date—that the Virgin Mary was sent in the same way to two righteous old people, Joachim, her father, and Anna, her mother; and there is still a popular tradition in Europe according to which the children of old parents are predestined to great things. This may be because their unexpected birth is looked upon as supernatural, but in the case of Zacharias and Elisabeth, and of Joachim and Anna, it looks far more as if the child born to them was all the more wonderful because they had deserved this blessing through a long life of goodness and resignation.

" And it came to pass that while he (Zacharias) executed the priest's office before God . . . his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord . . . and there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense."

The illustration of the annunciation of St. John's nativity is taken from the southern bronze door of the Baptistery in Florence—that is to say, of the small church, annexed to the Cathedral, where the baptism of infants takes place. The sculptures are attributed to a great artist of the fourteenth century, Andrea Pisano. The panel on the left-hand side illustrates faithfully St. Luke's text. The piece of tracery on the top suggests the inner part of the Temple or Holy Place, with a lamp hanging from the roof. Zacharias, in full priestly garments, is still waving the censer when the angel

*Photo by Alinari*

THE ANNUNCIATION OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

BY ANDREA PISANO

*(Door of the Baptistery, Florence)*

appears before him, one hand raised to emphasize his words. Zacharias was alone, the Holy Place being isolated from the rest of the Temple, so that " the whole multitude of the people " who " were praying without " did not see the winged figure.

" When Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord. . . . And he shall go before Him . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Almost in the same words, the angel Gabriel spoke, six months later, to the Virgin Mary, who also was troubled at his appearing until the angel reassured her: " Fear not." He uses the same comforting words in addressing Joseph (Matt. i. 20). It was quite natural that the apparition should startle them. To Zacharias and Joseph it was unexpected. If Mary was better prepared, it troubled her nevertheless, for even the sight of the humblest messenger of God must fill with awe the greatest saint. There is, however, a difference. As soon as Gabriel reassures Mary, every trouble ceases for her, she believes in every word he says and rejoices in the good tidings. Zacharias, on the contrary, lacks confidence: " Whereby shall I know this ?" he asks, " for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." The birth of the child seems to him impossible: He does not ask, " How shall this be ?" but " Whereby shall I know this ?" What sign, what proof, will you give me, that you are speaking the truth ? Gabriel gives him a sign—and a punishment: " And behold, thou shalt be dumb . . . until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season." There is, therefore, a difference between

the fear the angel inspires in Zacharias and the fear he inspires in Mary. It is the supernatural character of the apparition which affects Zacharias more than its beauty and wonder. He has been unexpectedly brought into contact with a miracle. It is more the extraordinary aspect of the angel which strikes him than his radiance and glory. He thinks more of what he is than of whence he comes. He argues with him; he has faith enough to see, but not enough to understand and to believe at once.

"And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless."

This scene is shown on the next panel of Pisano's door. The crowd is represented by a small group of five draped figures walking towards Zacharias as if anxious to hear what occurred. (Look at the sweeping lines of the draperies.) Zacharias lifts his left hand to stop their questions, while his right hand points to his lips, showing that he is unable to speak. The first man of the crowd points towards the sky, having already perceived that the priest had seen a heavenly vision, while the others receive the news with amazement.

Zacharias only recovered his speech after the birth of St. John, for it was necessary for him to see in order to believe. Thus we shall hear that St. Thomas had to touch Christ's wounds before believing in His resurrection. Let us pray to be good men such as Zacharias and St. Thomas, who believed after they had seen, but let us also pray to be given the faith of the Virgin and of those others who did not need to see in order to believe, for "blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."

# CHAPTER II

# ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

## CHAPTER II

### *ANNUNCIATION TO MARY*

"AND in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth . . . "

It is the second time that we see an angel play an important part in the story. It will not be the last. After announcing the birth of St. John, the angels announce the coming of Christ, direct the shepherds towards the stable, warn the kings not to go back to Herod, and urge Joseph to fly with the Mother and Child into Egypt.

Angels are the messengers of God; it is therefore natural that they should direct the action of those who are connected either with the birth or with the death of Jesus, for we must not forget that they appeared to Him in the Garden of Olives, and announced His resurrection to the holy women as they announced His Nativity to the shepherds. They are present at the time of the coming of the Son of God and at the time of His leaving the world. During His active life they are never mentioned, except when they comfort Christ in the desert. They no longer exert any influence on the course of events. If they had done so, Christ would not have struggled and suffered as a man, and it is only on account of His weakness and of His manhood that we are able to understand Him. He deprived Himself deliberately of direct supernatural help during the three years of His ministry. All He did was in the strength of the Spirit, and He taught us that any man with the same faith could do the same. Remember

how He admonished St. Peter, when His enemies, led by Judas, came to arrest Him in the garden: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. xxvi. 53).

The angel Gabriel therefore came "to a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the Virgin's name was Mary . . . and said, Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."

According to the legends concerning the life of the Virgin, which I have already mentioned, Mary was brought to the Temple at a very early age by Joachim and Anna, to be educated there in the service of God. When she was old enough to be married, a voice was heard in the Temple announcing that she must wed a man belonging to the house of David. The High Priest, accordingly, summoned the men of the house of David to the Temple and bade each of them lay on the altar a wooden rod. Joseph, being older than the others, did not think that he could be chosen. According to the story, his rod bloomed and a white dove alighted upon it. Following the commandment he had received, the High Priest joined Joseph and Mary's hands, while some of the rejected suitors broke their rods to show their disappointment. This scene has been painted over and over again. Though it is called the marriage of the Virgin, we must not forget that this ceremony was merely a betrothal, Mary going back to live with her parents, while Joseph was preparing their future home. This explains why the Virgin is troubled at the words of the angel, for she cannot understand how, not being yet married, the prediction could be fulfilled: "And, behold, thou shalt . . . bring forth a son, and shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest . . . And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end."

*Photo by Alinari*

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY (I)

BY GIOTTO

*(Arena Chapel, Padua)*

*Facing p. 10*

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY (2)

BY GIOTTO

*Photo by Alinari*

*(Arena Chapel, Padua)*

*Facing p. 11*

The masters of the fourteenth and even of the fifteenth century varied the attitude of the figures. Sometimes the angel is seen standing and the Virgin kneeling, sometimes the Virgin standing and the angel kneeling, sometimes the figures bow to each other. When he painted the Annunciation on the walls of the Arena chapel in Padua, Giotto followed the oldest tradition according to which both the angel and the Virgin Mary are kneeling, for the artist understood that, in this case, the angel does not merely deliver a message, but already reveres in the Virgin the future Mother of God and the sacred mystery of the Incarnation. At a later period of art we shall see Mary sitting or kneeling on a terrace overlooking a garden radiant with flowers, but the earlier and simpler interpretation places the scene in familiar surroundings. For Giotto, Mary is in her home, absorbed in prayer, when the miracle occurs. She still holds, in her right hand, her prayer-book. Her dress is by no means that of a poor woman, but every detail suggests the greatest simplicity. The only piece of furniture visible is a carved wooden desk, and the curtains, of plain material, are fastened on the pillars in a loose knot, in the same way as most housewives fix them nowadays for purposes of cleaning. This single detail gives to the scene a touch of homeliness which adds to the wonder of the apparition. The architecture completes the setting. Its main purpose is purely decorative, as it fills the space available on both sides of the arch separating the Choir from the body of the chapel.

"And the angel . . . said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. . . . For with God nothing shall be impossible."

In many pictures a hand, or even the figure of God surrounded

with angels, is shown in the heavens, while along the rays of light running from this vision to Mary flutters a white dove, representing the Holy Ghost. This symbol must have been suggested to the artists by the scene described at the time of Christ's Baptism: " And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him " (Luke iii. *22*).

Sometimes also a vase in which grows a lily, emblem of purity, stands between the angel and the Virgin, or the angel himself carries the lily in his left hand, while his right is raised in admonition. We have chosen on purpose a picture in which the dove and the lily do not appear, in order to show that the great religious artists did not need, though they frequently used, these symbols to express the mysterious meaning of the angelic greeting. If we look carefully at Giotto's picture, it seems as if the angel conveyed the words of the Gospel by a mute salutation and as if Mary understood him.

To be the mother of the promised Messiah was the most cherished wish of every girl in Israel. Mary must have yearned for this blessing, though she never thought herself worthy of it. The truth is conveyed to her by the apparition of Gabriel and his reverent attitude more than by his words and explanations. She kneels in grateful submission and says: " Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

That she should have felt some pride would have been only human, but the first word she utters, when such unheard-of distinction is conferred upon her, is " Behold the *handmaid*," a word which, in English, suggests the servant who wears out her hands cleaning the dishes and washing the floors. God had placed her above all women; she acknowledged this blessing by placing herself below them all, as if she had never more fully realized her unworthiness than at the very time when she was chosen as the most worthy.

If a movement of pride would have been natural in an ordinary woman, few saints surely would have resisted a feeling of doubt or curiosity. But, while Zacharias asks for a sign, Mary scarcely dares to fathom the meaning of the mysterious message. In a complete forgetfulness of self, she surrenders to the will of God: " Be it unto me according to thy word."

This humility is not the result of weakness, but of strength. Mary, as seen by Giotto and his school, is not the delicate and emaciated girl so often pictured by later artists. Both her figure and her face reveal almost as much strength and energy as those of the sacred messenger kneeling before her. If we compare this type of the Virgin in her girlhood with that of Mary in the supreme hour of her trial, during the tragic scenes of the Passion, we may realize the reason for which Giotto instinctively turned to an image revealing great powers of endurance. For, in spite of the brightness of the scene and the radiant light flooding the room, this Annunciation, like those of all the best religious painters, is endowed with a kind of harmonious melancholy. It is clearly conveyed in our illustrations by the solemn attitude of the angel and the grave expression in Mary's face. She is not concerned for herself, she is not even overwhelmed by the task imposed upon her, she is already the Mother, and thinks of her Child and of the tragedy which must come to the Son of God living among men.

Her submission is not only the submission of the faithful servant who obeys his master's orders, it is the submission of the woman who consents to bring forth a Child, not for her sake nor for His sake, but for the sake of the unknown and often cruel multitudes which He is destined to save.

# CHAPTER III

# THE VISITATION

## CHAPTER III

### *THE VISITATION*

"AND Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth."

The angel had announced to Mary that her "cousin Elisabeth" had also conceived a son. Immediately after this announcement Mary leaves Nazareth, on the edge of the plain of Esdraelon in Galilee, to undertake a long journey through Samaria and the higher hills of Judea. We do not know exactly in which town was the house of Zacharias, but even if it stood on the border of Samaria, it was at a distance of eighty to ninety miles, over rough roads and mule tracks. The journey on a donkey's back must have taken from five to six days; this leads us to believe that Mary was very anxious to meet Elisabeth. It was not in order to share with her the secret of the Annunciation, for this was too holy to be revealed to anyone. Neither can it have been to look after her, since three months had still to elapse before the birth of St. John. It is more likely that a great spiritual friendship bound the two women together.

Mary's mother was, no doubt, dead by this time, and Mary, feeling instinctively the need of protection and spiritual comfort, turned naturally towards her cousin, who was like an elder sister to her. The haste with which she set out upon this uncomfortable journey is in keeping with the exalted salutation she met with on her arrival. Both women had shared the same faith in the coming

of the Messiah and the same hope that they might be the instrument in the fulfilment of this prophecy. Elisabeth knew already that she was going to bring forth a great prophet who would prepare the way for the Saviour of Israel. Mary had just heard that it was through herself that His coming would be accomplished. It is easy to understand, therefore, that the two women should be attracted to each other and that the bond uniting their two children should be manifested by their reunion.

"And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women."

These are the very words which Gabriel used when he greeted Mary in Nazareth, so that the Visitation may be considered as the confirmation of the Annunciation. As the child moved within her "Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost," and God put into her mouth the words uttered by His messenger. She is overjoyed, at the same time, that this great blessing should come to her greatest friend and humbly surprised that Mary, glorified by this new grace, should have come such a long way to visit her.

"And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

This was evidently the moment pictured by Giotto in the fresco of the Arena Chapel in Padua.

The older woman bends before Mary, extending her hand to support her; she looks up anxiously into her eyes and smiles.

In a crude but expressive way the old painter insists on the smile and on the humility of Elisabeth's attitude before Mary. The pathos of this scene can only be realized if one remembers that the blessing which had come to Mary would have been the object of envy of most women in Israel. Not for one moment does

*Photo by Alinari*

THE VISITATION

BY GIOTTO

*(Arena Chapel, Padua)*

*p. 18*

Elisabeth dream that she might have been placed, when a girl, in the same position as Mary, nor does any shadow of regret mar her joy in seeing the most sacred wish of her friend fulfilled. The Visitation, as painted by Giotto, has a very wide meaning. It tells us of the uplifting joy which comes from rejoicing over other people's happiness. Those who can only be happy when some blessing comes upon them, are the prisoners of their own fate, and remain narrowly dependent on its sudden changes. Those who rejoice over the blessings of others are freed from such shackles. Whatever happens to them, they will always find in this world some occasion to be thankful; every happy man or woman they meet will give them a share in their joy, without this joy being in the least diminished. It is true that Elisabeth has just had the most unexpected happiness, but this does not in the least lessen the significance of the scene, for it is not the humble who are inclined to envy, it is usually those who, having much, desire more. The humility of Elisabeth before Mary is relatively easy to explain, but that St. John's mother should bow her head before the mother of the One whom St. John acknowledged for his Master shows that Elisabeth was freed from any mean thought and that even a mother's pride, which is, perhaps, the most excusable of human weaknesses, had completely deserted her.

The expression of Mary, on the other hand, remains grave. Elisabeth's greeting helps her to realize more fully the mysterious meaning of the first salutation. Her seriousness contrasts with Elisabeth's emotion; she bends her head towards her cousin, while with her hand placed under Elisabeth's arm she seems to prevent her from kneeling; in her own eyes she is not the Lord's Mother, but merely God's handmaiden, and it is to God alone that all praise is due: " My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low

estate of His handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

The Magnificat is only a development of Mary's answer to Gabriel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." It insists still more on the apparent contradiction between the low estate of a poor girl and the unequalled blessing she receives, but instead of attributing this unexpected happiness to her merits, Mary seems to see in it only a new proof of God's power. "For He that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is His name. . . . He hath shewed strength with His arm; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. . . . He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away."

We see here the first expression of an idea which pervades the Gospel. It does not mean that the spiritual blessings are the exclusive privilege of the poor, but rather that poverty—not necessarily want—prepares the soul of man to receive them, while riches distract from the thought of God. The foundation and the spread of Christianity are entirely built on this idea that the last shall be first and the first last, that material poverty will be compensated for by spiritual riches, and that material riches are an obstacle to the liberation of the soul and to its communion with God through the Holy Ghost.

Most of Christ's first disciples were poor working people. It was through the slave quarters of Rome that Christianity conquered the Roman Empire, and, many centuries after the Faith had triumphed, all the great saints and reformers, all the founders of monastic orders, such as St. Francis, went back to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount as to the purest source of Christian inspiration.

Simplicity and frugality of life ought never, according to the

Christian doctrine, to be imposed by circumstances; they are not a necessity, but a blessing, they ought not to be adopted as an unavoidable hardship, but deliberately chosen as the freest and happiest way of living. The poor are free from care, free from grief, pride, and jealousy; their soul is like an empty house which needs only an altar to be turned into a church.

Twelve centuries after the Magnificat was first spoken, Francis, then a rich young merchant in Assisi, while enjoying himself with his friends at night, was struck by a sudden inspiration and stopped behind them. When questioned by his friends, who suggested that he looked so pensive because he was thinking of taking a wife, he replied: " Truly have ye spoken, for that I thought of taking unto me a bride nobler and richer and fairer than ever ye have seen." It was only years later that they realized that he had not spoken of a human bride, but of " true religion and poverty." In the roof of the lower church of Assisi in which the saint was buried, Giotto, about a century later, painted the symbolic marriage of Francis with Poverty. When looking at Giotto's pictures and wondering how they can depict so faithfully the Christian teaching of the Gospel, we must never forget that Brother Francis, through his humility, his poverty and obedience, had awakened throughout Europe a powerful Christian revival which still inspired poets, painters, and sculptors many years after his death.

# CHAPTER IV

# NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

## CHAPTER IV

### *NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST*

THE nativity of St. John preceded the nativity of Jesus, as the annunciation to Zacharias preceded the annunciation to Mary, so that, during the first chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, the two stories run parallel, with the exception of the visit paid by Mary to Elisabeth. We know nothing of the relationship between Jesus and St. John during their boyhood, and it is not until the baptism of Christ, at the beginning of His active life, that the prophet and his Master are brought into contact again.

There is a marked contrast between the nativity of St. John and that of Jesus. St. Luke tells us that Elisabeth's "neighbours and cousins" shared her great joy when the child was born, and our illustration (another panel of Pisano's door) shows us the mother, lying on a couch, attended by servants or friends, and the child washed by his nurse.

According to St. Luke's story, no special miracle accompanies this wonderful birth; we see no angels hovering over the house, no star shining in the sky, but, on the eighth day, when the time came to give a name to the child, a discussion arose between the mother and her relatives, the first saying that he should be called John, while the others wanted to call him Zacharias, "after the name of his father." St. Luke seems to suggest that this naming of St. John by Elisabeth was inspired in her by the Holy Ghost rather than communicated in writing by Zacharias. Her "cousins and neighbours" objected, saying, "There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name."

On another panel of Pisano's door we see the child brought to Zacharias by Elisabeth (notice her halo) and two attendants, in order that the father should express his wish. "And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table (meaning a tablet), and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all." They marvelled at the fact that both father and mother, moved by the same Spirit, had agreed to give the same strange name to the child of their old age.

Pisano gives us all the essential features of the quiet, impressive scene. On the right, two young women, following Elisabeth, whisper to each other. In the centre, the saint reverently holds the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, her cheek tenderly pressed on his head. On the left, Zacharias is seen, seated, writing on his knee. While we may find more interesting details in Giotto's frescoes, and in some paintings of the early fifteenth century, this door is, perhaps, one of the best examples we know of a faithful interpretation of the Gospel text. Great sculpture is necessarily chary of incidents. Like the Gospel, it avoids any detail which is not essential to the scene. It relies for its effect on the perfect harmony of a few well-chosen lines.

But a greater miracle was still to happen. Gabriel had told Zacharias that, as a sign of the truth of his prediction, the old man should be dumb until the day when the things he announced should be performed. Now that the performance had taken place, at the very moment when the father had named his child, "his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God."

Moved by the Holy Ghost, Zacharias prophesies in his own house, very much as Simeon prophesies in the Temple. It is another example of the parallelism of the two stories. The annunciation to Zacharias prepares the annunciation to Mary; the nativity

*Photo by Alinari*

THE VISITATION AND THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

BY ANDREA PISANO

*(Door of the Baptistery, Florence)*

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of St. John prepares the nativity of Christ; Zacharias' prophecy prepares Simeon's, as the Baptist will prepare the way of his Lord.

All they that heard Zacharias' words might well have laid them up in their hearts, for he did not refer first to the child which was presented to him, but to the fulfilment of the promise made by God to his fathers, and of the oath which God swore to Abraham, that Israel being delivered out of the hand of his enemies " might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness " all the days of his life. " Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David."

Then Zacharias surely rose, and took the child from his mother's arms and addressed him, saying: " And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins." Remember what Gabriel had said: " And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The second prophecy is far more precise than the first. We hear now of St. John's essential mission: to prepare the ways of Christ, to walk in front of Him, as an elder brother, and remove the stones and thorns from His path; " to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins." Christ came as a blessing, healing bodies, healing souls, bringing forgiveness and salvation, but St. John had to clear the way before Him, stirring souls to repentance, provoking confession, washing the sins away with the waters of Jordan. He ploughed the field before the Sower came. Others, later, carried the seed all over the world and saw the crop rise. He alone tore up the ground with his fierce eloquence, taking on his shoulders the hard, ungrate-

ful task of killing the snakes and uprooting the weeds, leaving to a greater One than himself the benefit of his work.

No wonder that, speaking of him, Jesus placed him in the forefront of mankind, for he worked harder than any apostle, without any direct help from His Master, for he prepared a way whose end he did not know.

On the next panel we see St. John as a boy, already covered with his " camel's hair " cloak, and carrying a small wooden cross as a prophetic emblem of the new faith. We see him in a hilly country dotted with a few trees on which some birds are perched. Such was the vision which the old sculptor had of the " deserts," which did not mean, necessarily, an arid plain, but suggested simply that, from his early youth, the child, who had " waxed strong in spirit," lived the life of a hermit, away from the contact of men, in order to prepare himself for his strenuous task. Trees and caves, no doubt, offered him their shelter, and the beasts and birds their companionship.

The only thing we know of St. John's boyhood is that he was strong enough to deprive himself of the society of man.

We may, perhaps, smile at the way in which Pisano indicates roughly the main features of the landscape, trees and rocks and birds; but we should certainly not smile at the small figure of that strong, selfless child, leaving the comfort of home and the protection of his parents to challenge the perils and privations of wilderness and solitude. We should smile still less, seeing that he is armed for this tremendous task only with a frail wooden cross, not only because the child would be too weak to carry a heavier one, but because it is the first time that the great symbol of the Christian faith is shown. Surely the old artists were right in placing it in St. John's hand, since none did more for it, with less ground to hope for its triumph.

*Photo by Alinari*

ZACHARIAS WRITING THE CHILD'S NAME AND ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE WILDERNESS

BY ANDREA PISANO *(Door of the Baptistery, Florence)*

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# CHAPTER V

# NATIVITY OF CHRIST

## CHAPTER V

### *NATIVITY OF CHRIST*

"AND it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. . . . And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem . . . To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife."

According to St. Luke, then, for the second time Mary undertook the long journey from Galilee to Judea. The Roman authorities who administered the land were making a census of the population, and everyone had to report in person to be registered. The wives, however, were not compelled to accompany their husbands, and it seems strange that, in her condition of health, Mary should have gone to Bethlehem and endured the hardships which such a journey implied. It may be that she refused to be separated from her husband at that time, but the obvious explanation is that since all prophecies pointed to the nativity of the Saviour in Bethlehem she would have gone there even if no census had been held. The coincidence increased the discomfort of the journey since, on account of the great concourse of people gathered in this town, "there was no room for them in the inn" when they arrived. Neither the circumstances of the journey nor the fact that Joseph and Mary were obliged to find a temporary shelter for the night implies necessarily that they were reduced to great poverty, but popular imagination never wavered on this point.

Many popular carols show us Joseph going anxiously from house to house, asking for hospitality, before being obliged to seek refuge in the stable. We see him leading the ass on which the weary Virgin is riding, and being driven from door to door until they reach the outskirts of the town. According to another tradition, the host, unable to receive them in the inn, but touched with pity, offered them this humble shelter. Whatever the case may be, in the Gospel and in all the stories and pictures it inspired during the Middle Ages, Joseph and Mary are represented as poor people, tramping the roads and driven to share with beasts the roof of a stable. The artificial life which we live in towns has considerably altered our ideas of hospitality. For country-people, even for nomad tribes, the welcoming of the poor traveller stands as almost the first moral law. Many touching examples of the respect due to strangers may be quoted from pagan times, when gods disguised as travellers wandered about the earth and rewarded those who sheltered them and punished those who drove them from their doors, as the elves and fairies do in our old stories.

Though the circumstances of the Nativity teach us the same lesson, the sacred character of the guest, they are different in many ways. Joseph and Mary submit mildly to their fate, without punishing the innkeeper, without revealing their secret; they do exactly what the humblest tramp would have done, and receive thankfully the miserable shelter given them.

Was it a stable or was it a cave ? The only indication we have is the mention of a manger by St. Luke and the fact that tradition places the scene of the Nativity in a cave on the outskirts of the town. Most of the early artists combine the two ideas, as Giotto does in our picture, by showing the cave in the background, in front of which is built a kind of shed or outhouse, with the manger well in evidence, for the manger is the important thing. St. Luke

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

BY GIOTTO

*Photo by Alinari*

mentions it no less than three times: Mary wrapped her Child " in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger "; it is the sign given by the angel to the shepherds and which they recognize when they reach the stable. There was no bed ready to receive the Baby, so the Son of God was laid in a rough manger, and something of the glory of the Nativity shone into the life of the beasts. They are in Giotto's picture, as in every picture dealing with the subject, though the Gospel does not mention them. The presence of the ass is easy to explain; it must have carried the Virgin on the journey. The ox might have been added by tradition; it must have been in the stable before the travellers arrived. In most sculptures and pictures the heads of both beasts are seen bending over the manger as if to warm the Child with their breath. It may seem strange that the Divine character of the Child Jesus should have been first acknowledged by dumb beasts, then by rough shepherds, and finally by wise kings, but this order is completely in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel and of early Christian tradition. It emphasizes the humble circumstances of the Nativity. Christ was born of the wife of a working man; the travellers had been refused shelter by men and been welcomed by beasts; the lowest in the order of creation were the first to enjoy the privilege of greeting their God. This association of animal life with religious tradition occupies an important part in Christian legends. Quite apart from the frequent allusions in the Gospels to the Lamb, the ass, the birds, etc., we might mention any number of animals, like St. Anthony's pig and St. Jerome's lion, which are the best friends of the saints and remain faithful to them in the hour of persecution. The idea conveyed is that even animals, which seem to be outside the Christian scheme, will see the light and understand the truth when men whose hearts are hardened by doubt and antagonism are not able to understand it. Thus

St. Francis of Assisi preaches to the birds and St. Anthony of Padua to the fishes. The animals chosen are tame or defenceless; the only exceptions, such as St. Jerome's lion and the wolf converted by St. Francis, have been won over by the kindness and patience of the saints. There is the greatest difference possible between the extension of God's blessing from man to beasts and flowers and the animal worship so prevalent in other religions. Usually these animals are supposed to represent some fierce spirit or some redoubtable god under whose power mankind trembles. They are not exalted for their meekness or their patience, they are worshipped for the terror they inspire.

Our two pictures show, at one and the same time, two distinct episodes of the story, the Annunciation to the Shepherds and the Nativity. Giotto, painting in the fourteenth century, boldly represented both incidents in the foreground. Gentile da Fabriano, a century later, feels already more bound by realistic conventions and places the shepherds in the background of his picture. We are only concerned, at present, with the part of these illustrations dealing with the Nativity. Giotto, according to the oldest tradition, shows the Virgin reclining on a couch, but her attitude, bending over the child, who had just been taken up from the manger by an attendant, is a new departure from the point of view of Italian art, though it may be already found in earlier works among the sculptures of French cathedrals. The traditional representation, in the earlier centuries, placed the manger behind the couch, while the Virgin lay in front of it in an impassive attitude. Giotto infused a new life into the subject by insisting on the womanly and motherly feelings of the Mother for her Child. The movement of the arms and the expression of the eyes reveal awe and tenderness, wonder and joy. The earlier painters showed us the Mother of God; the more modern painters have shown

*Photo by Alinari*

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

BY GENTILE DA FABRIANO

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us again and again striking pictures of human maternity; but it is only during a short period that artists were able to express both feelings at the same time, so that we do not know where human wonder ends and where religious awe begins. It will be noticed that, in Gentile's picture, the Baby, freed from its swaddling clothes, lies on the ground while Mary kneels over Him absorbed in prayer. This new interpretation of the subject was generally adopted in the fifteenth century, as it lent itself to more graceful grouping and a better effect of light and shade, the radiant figure of the Child illuminating the cave and the stable. The kneeling position of ox and ass belongs to the same period. It is generally adopted by Fra Angelico, and expresses, in a delightful way, this union of man and beast in the common worship of the Child to which I have alluded above.

As for Joseph, he is always imagined, during the early period, in a sitting position, drowsing and wrapped up in his cloak. He is an old man, very tired with the journey and with the trouble he must have taken to make Mary as comfortable as possible for the night, lighting the fire, fetching water, according to popular ideas, and rendering whatever service he could. He has given way to sleep at the very moment when the miracle for which he has worked so hard occurs. The best of men, he is only endowed with human strength and weakness. Like St. Peter, St. James and St. John in the Garden of Olives, he could not watch long enough.

The Gospel gives us a very short account of Christ's childhood. When, therefore, we think of our Saviour, it is either as a little child or as a grown-up man, so that womanhood in the Virgin, childhood, and manhood are sanctified by the Incarnation. Never before in the story of religions had the idea of God taken the shape of a new-born babe; never had one seen common folk and great kings bend their heads before the weakness of a small Child, as

if the contrast between their power and His weakness increased the wonder of His Divinity. Many false gods had come to mankind in pomp and glory, making great display of their supernatural power, but the true God came under the humblest and weakest form He could assume, among the humblest and poorest surroundings.

But there is another lesson to draw from the Nativity. It is taught by Christ Himself when He declares later that, unless we " become as little children," we " shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." There is something sacred in the newness of life when the creature, just released from the hands of God, still retains, so to speak, the freshness of a divine dew. Even now, in spite of the unhealthy conditions under which many children are born, there is no period in human life when man seems so near to God as in childhood. This feeling is not difficult to justify. It is, perhaps, because children are so instinctively sincere; they have not yet been spoilt by the world, they have not yet been obliged to hide their thoughts to adapt themselves to adverse circumstances. If they are well, they are naturally happy; everything is for them a discovery, a great adventure; even when they cry, it is only to claim attention. They may weep a great deal, but their tears are never bitter; they open limpid eyes on a limpid world, ever ready to admire, to love, to worship. Unless we be like these little children, unless we succeed in keeping the ready love, the indestructible hope, and the steady faith which God gave us when we came into this world, we shall not be able to return to Him. Education is not merely the effort we make to rise above childhood by strengthening our character and controlling our passions, it is also the effort we make to remain little children, to preserve the treasure of the spontaneity and sincerity which was given to us at our birth. Unless we succeed in completing our

journey without losing this treasure, we shall not find our way back to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Every man, in order to become great, must remain little; there is no true greatness without humility. Christ was born a child; most men, when they are born, are nearer Christ than they will ever be in the rest of their lives, and if, in many ways, men and women can teach children, in the most essential things they can be taught by them. Every baby is an example to us; it teaches us to be true above all things, and to find untold happiness in the smallest gifts of God.

# CHAPTER VI

# THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

## CHAPTER VI

### *THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS*

"AND there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. . . ." This remark suggests that the Nativity did not necessarily occur in winter, when the Christian world celebrates the event. It is not the custom in Mediterranean countries, and specially in a hilly country like Judea, to keep the flocks in the fields at night in December. Christian tradition, however, at a very early date, fixed Christmas on December 25th in spite of this circumstance, which may have been caused by exceptional conditions. In Italian art this does not appear so clearly, though it may be noticed that the tree in Gentile's picture is leafless; but further north, in Flanders and Germany, for instance, the early painters make a special feature of the wintry landscape. Many Christmas carols in Western Europe show us Mary and Joseph walking through drifts of snow or Joseph breaking the ice with his staff to draw water from the well. Poets and painters were, no doubt, impressed by the contrast between the miraculous birth and the hostile conditions in which it occurred. There was the same reason to place the Nativity in December as to dwell on the poor circumstances in which Joseph and Mary were placed, and on the beasts receiving in the stable the Child which had been refused hospitality by men. Popular imagination, no doubt, developed to a great extent the mere suggestion regarding these circumstances which may be found in the Gospels. The wonder of the miracle

was increased by the fact that it occurred in the most adverse surroundings. The least which can be said in favour of this popular interpretation is that it is entirely in accordance with the spirit of the Gospels as expressed in the Magnificat—the poor will be exalted and the rich will be sent empty away—and, elsewhere, that the first shall be last and the last first.

The same idea is made evident by the choice of the first men to whom the Nativity was revealed. These were poor shepherds, wandering in the fields, not even farmers, still less rich or wise men. Wealth and Wisdom paid also their tribute, but they came later. Poverty and Innocence were privileged, and, among all workmen, shepherds were chosen, not only because they represented a traditional trade of the Jews from the time of Abraham, but also because no human work offered a better symbol of the Christian doctrine. We hear a great deal in the Gospel of the husbandman tilling his field and sowing his corn on good and bad ground, and of the disciples who, after being fishers of fishes, became fishers of men, but the most frequent parables allude to the shepherd's work, not only the feeding of the sheep, but specially the rescue of the lost lamb which, after a long search, is brought back safely to the fold. Neither must we forget that, in the early days of Christian art, when the paintings in the catacombs and the sculptures on the sarcophagi were mostly symbolical, Christ was always represented under the features of the Good Shepherd, carrying the lamb on His back, according to His own words: "I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John x. 11).

There are many good reasons why the shepherd should thus become the most perfect symbol of man. He leads a lonely and wandering life among the beasts for which he is responsible; he guides them, he watches over them by day and night, mostly on

high-lying pastures with the valleys at his feet and the sky over his head, the sky in which he has learnt to read the hour and the direction of his ways. The nomadic life of the shepherd makes him independent of immediate surroundings. He lives among the simple and rugged outlines of wild landscapes, and it has been suggested, with some reason, that most monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Mohammedanism, were born among pastoral tribes.

The very life of the shepherd, which does not entail such an exacting labour as that of the agriculturist, but claims constant watchfulness, creates the contemplative spirit. Compared with the farmer, the shepherd is a dreamer. He was, for a long time, in Western Europe, the songster and the story-teller, the man through whom folk-lore was transmitted from generation to generation in every village. He is still, in some countries, a kind of poet or soothsayer. David, the poet prophet of Israel, was a shepherd.

There were, according to St. Luke, several shepherds in the fields on Christmas Eve. Both Giotto and Gentile show us only two of them. Many times we find three shepherds in primitive paintings, as in the old Nativity plays and in some carols, but their number is never so restricted as that of the wise men or kings, and in more modern times the number increases in order to provide more animation for the scene.

" And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not. . . ."

This coming of the angel in the still and starlit night and the fright of the shepherds is admirably described in the small scene in the back of Gentile's picture. For the third time, following St. Luke, the angel intervenes in the story, causing fear or

trouble and reassuring his hearers. As in the case of the annunciation to Zacharias, he gives a sign as confirmation of his message. Zacharias was a priest, and doubted, and was made dumb. The ignorant shepherds are afraid but of ready faith, and the sign given to them is a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

At a later date, artists will describe the adoration of the shepherds as a separate incident, distinct from the Nativity. This subject, however, was not thus treated by the early artists, who were always preoccupied with interpreting the text closely and insisted on the fact that the annunciation to the shepherds took place at the same time as the Nativity. The shepherds and their flock become thus an incident of the Christmas scene: they are seen, either in the background, as in Gentile's picture, or in the foreground, as in Giotto's fresco; but, in the latter case, the two scenes must be considered as enacted separately and as being divided by a long distance. Manifestly the shepherds are not concerned with the Babe in the manger, but only with the angel who appears to them and with the message he delivers. The group of sheep and goats at their feet link the two scenes together, for they might as well belong to the stable as to the flock.

" And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

This heavenly manifestation is, perhaps, with the scene of Christ's Baptism and the Transfiguration the most conspicuous acknowledgment of Christ's divine character by heavenly voices and apparitions. It must be noticed that the choir of angels sang in the fields and disappeared into heaven before the shepherds took the resolution to go to Bethlehem. We find them, nevertheless, on the roof of the stable in Giotto's Nativity and in those of

many masters of his time. It may be said that here they are part of the scene describing the annunciation to the shepherds, but the same remark is true of many pictures in which the shepherds do not appear. The angelic message was, no doubt, for the artists, the necessary complement to the Nativity. Whether we choose to adopt the text of the Authorized Version of the Bible (" peace, good will towards men ") or that of the Latin version (" peace to men of goodwill "), the message can only be a message of Peace, not necessarily, as often stated, of peace between men, but specially of peace between God and man. It reasserts the old Covenant first given to Adam and later renewed to Noah and Abraham. It insists on the fact that no fundamental misunderstanding can any longer exist between God and man. Some ground for such a misunderstanding might have been found, in the Old Testament, in the fact that God spoke to man merely through prophets, who, being men themselves, were liable to error. The coming of Christ and the wonder of the Incarnation removed all possibility of misapprehension. Now God Himself was speaking to mankind without using any messenger. No greater proof of goodwill could He give, and no men of goodwill could listen to that voice without understanding it.

" And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem. . . . And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

The response of the shepherds to the annunciation is nearly as direct as that of Mary. They did not ask for a sign; it was given to them, not in token of the truth of the angelic words, but in order that they should recognize the Child when they saw Him. Their enthusiasm and readiness to accept the miracle is immediately translated into action: " Let us now go even unto Bethlehem."

Thus Peter said, later, after the Transfiguration: "If Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias." For them also, "it is good . . . to be here," to witness such tremendous and touching miracles, to believe in them, and to act upon that belief. No wonder that, in our old carols, the shepherds sing or play on their pipes on their way to the stable. It is the chorus of mankind answering the chorus of angels. St. Luke tells us that they went "with haste," but not necessarily without snatching hurriedly some present to bring to the Child and the Mother. Popular tradition is insistent on this point. It seemed unbelievable that these good shepherds did not do for Mary what any peasant does every day on hearing of any ordinary birth: bring with him milk, bread, or other food, and perhaps some fuel for the hearth. Some continental carols make quite a feature of this subject, shepherds and shepherdesses discussing at great length the gifts which would be most appreciated, and some of the Renaissance painters show us the shepherds bringing some presents, in several instances a young lamb. But the earlier interpreters of the Gospel scrupulously adhered to the text; for them the shepherds' presents were manifestly a picturesque detail of secondary importance. The essential thing is that, immediately on the revelation of the great news, they believed in it, went to see the Child, and "made known abroad the saying that was told them concerning" Him. Within a few hours, they accomplished the three cardinal duties of Christians: they heard the Gospel, they worshipped, and they spread the Gospel. It took the wise men, in spite of their education and riches, a long journey and many inquiries to do the same. The shepherds stand in the vanguard of Christianity; they are light of foot, unhampered by crown and heavy cloak and the possessions of this world. They are light-hearted and cheery as poor men should be; they do not ponder

on books nor scrutinize the skies; they need not search for the great light, it comes upon them.

There are many ways to reach the truth—the long way of wisdom, meditation, and experience, and the short way of innocence, childlikeness, and faith. The first may be the surest, but the second is certainly the quickest.

# CHAPTER VII

# THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

## CHAPTER VII

### *THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI*

THE next scene, according to St. Luke, ought to be the presentation of the Child in the Temple, which must have taken place after the Purification—that is to say, forty days after the Nativity.

Guided by their instinct for artistic contrast, and by an early tradition which brought the magi and their brilliant train to the same poor stable previously visited by the shepherds, the masters of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries introduced here the episode referred to by St. Matthew (ii.) and describing the visit and the homage paid by some "wise men from the East" to the Child and His Mother.

Many commentators, for some reasons into the details of which we cannot here enter, place the presentation in the Temple between the adoration of the shepherds and the adoration of the magi, and suppose that the latter episode took place at a later date, when the Holy Family, which had gone back to Nazareth after the presentation in the Temple (Luke ii. 39), revisited the scene of the Nativity. Both interpretations are open to criticism.

We are placed before two distinct narratives: that of St. Matthew, making no reference to the shepherds and to the presentation in the Temple, and that of St. Luke, ignoring the visit of the wise men and the flight into Egypt.

We need not, therefore, apologize for following the plan laid

down by the old masters, which, whatever its defects, has at least the advantage of simplicity and artistic beauty.

Let us, therefore, turn to St. Matthew's account:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . . behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem."

These wise men were called magi, not necessarily because they were addicted to magical arts, but because they belonged to the sacerdotal caste of the Persians, who enjoyed the reputation of being freed from idolatry. They might have come from Persia or from Arabia, for the magi were not confined to the country of their origin. Their reputation for wisdom distinguished them among all Gentiles for receiving the privilege of the early revelation of the great miracle, announced by Eastern prophecies, and expected, not only in Judea, but also in the neighbouring countries.

Thus the early worship of Christ foreshadows the destiny of the Christian Faith, the shepherds receiving the first message from the voice of the angels, the magi receiving the second message in the less distinct appearance of the star.

The shepherds find their way to the stable without hesitation; the magi have to inquire in Jerusalem before discovering the road to Bethlehem. Christ was born first for the good Jews of simple and humble heart, then for the wise men among the Gentiles who yearned for His coming. His Apostles were simple workmen of Galilee; His early adherents belonged to the Gentile world; and it was through their enthusiasm that the Faith spread towards Greece and Rome.

It will be noticed that St. Matthew does not state either the social position of the magi or their number. The idea of the three kings is, nevertheless, a very early one, and was generally adopted by Christianity for many centuries before Gentile painted his picture. The idea of kingship was, very likely, suggested by

*Photo by Alinari*

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

BY GENTILE DA FABRIANO

*(Uffizi, Florence)*

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the precious character of the presents which the magi brought with them. In the earliest pictures, the kings appear merely clothed in Oriental costume, with the Phrygian cap and without any distinction of age; later on, we see the old king, the middle-aged king, and the young king, wearing the same costume; later still, in Giotto's pictures, for instance, the crown replaces the cap; and later still, as in our picture by Gentile painted at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the magi appear in the gorgeous apparel of Western kings and emperors of the period. About fifty years later, the Renaissance art introduces a new distinction, by giving to the young king the features of a negro, while the middle-aged king assumes an Oriental type, so that the main races are represented in the great act of worship which brings all mankind to the feet of the Child.

The magi came to Jerusalem and asked: "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and are come to worship Him." Herod the king was troubled when he heard these things, and inquired of the priests and scribes "where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet. . . . And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when ye have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also."

Our illustration shows us, on the same picture, the various episodes of the kings' pilgrimage. At the back, on the left, the three kings are seen on the top of a hill, watching the star, while their retinue, unaware of the miracle, awaits them on the road. In the central background of the middle panel, the brilliant cortège, with camels and horses, dogs and falcons, is shown approaching the entrance of Jerusalem, while, on the right, the three kings enter Bethlehem, where they have been sent by Herod. All the details

of the procession, made plainer still in the main picture in the foreground, are evidently inspired by similar scenes witnessed by Gentile in his own time. The courtiers' costumes and fanciful head-dresses are those of the Italian Early Renaissance, so are the horses' harness and the general apparel of hunting, with falcons and hounds. Camels, leopards, and monkeys were, no doubt, added to suggest the East; but every feature of the landscape—mediæval towns, well-tended fields, and evergreen trees—is typical of Umbria and Tuscany where the artist lived. Giotto and his followers treated the same subject again and again, but were never able to endow it with the same brilliancy. They were, no doubt, to a certain extent cramped by their strict respect for the text and their shyness at introducing boldly realistic incidents in the Gospel scene. It is, perhaps, the only episode which received a better treatment at the hands of the Early Renaissance painters, at a period when the spirit of deep devotion was not yet lost, while artistic imagination was allowed more scope.

When they saw the star "standing over where the young Child was, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." There can be no doubt that for St. Matthew the star was a purely miraculous apparition. It was only seen by the kings, who deserved the revelation, and remained unnoticed by their followers and by Herod and the Pharisees, otherwise it would have been unnecessary for them to suggest that the magi should come back from Bethlehem and give an account of their journey. The early artists remain generally faithful to this interpretation. Sometimes, while one of the kings is kneeling, another points to the star standing over the roof, but the attendants remain unconcerned. This unconcern is curiously emphasized by Gentile. Some of the courtiers and servants exchange jokes, one watches a falcon killing a bird, another unfastens the spur of his master.

No one, except the three kings, seems really concerned in the wondrous Child and His Mother. Just as the shepherds had been chosen, among all the Jews, for the revelation of Christ's birth, so the magi were chosen, among all Gentiles, as the only ones worthy of this great privilege.

" And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him : and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." The allusion to treasures suggests the idea that besides the three symbolic presents the kings brought to the Child and His parents valuable gifts; hence the belief in their great wealth and power and the strong contrast established between the two adorations, whereby the humblest and the mightiest in the land join in the act of worship.

The three presents are contained in golden vessels. The first one has already been handed to the attendants of the Virgin, who wonder at its costliness, their attitude contrasting with that of Joseph and Mary, intent on the spiritual meaning of the scene. This distraction and worldliness of the two attendants balances, on the left of the picture, the animated scene on the right in which the retinue show their indifference to their masters' errand, while the looks of Mary and Joseph, on the left, and of the two younger kings, on the right, are centred on the little Child patting the bald head of the old king, who kisses His feet.

The meaning of the three symbolic gifts has often been explained. Gold stands apparently for kingship, whether in this world, as the question put to Herod by the magi may suggest, or in the other, which better corresponds to the meaning of the other gifts, frankincense standing manifestly for worship, and myrrh (which was offered to Christ on the Cross and used in embalming

His body), for suffering and martyrdom. We have alluded before to the apprehensive attitude of Mary at the Annunciation, which was very much emphasized by certain artists and derived from their own knowledge of the sufferings which the angelic salutation implied, but until now we have not found a word in the Gospel concerning Christ's future martyrdom. The gift of myrrh by the youngest and fairest king is the first warning which the Holy Family receive. It will be confirmed at a later stage by the clear prophecy of Simeon in the Temple. Considered in this way, the scene assumes an intensely dramatic meaning. While the servants are still admiring the gold brought by the eldest king, and while Joseph and Mary witness the magnificent homage paid to the Child, which confirms all their hopes, the young king somewhat pityingly looks upon the scene and holds delicately between his fingers the brilliant vessel hiding the terrible secret. It is at the climax of the Child's glory that the tragedy of His end is revealed. The days of joy and triumph will soon be over. Herod has begun already to plot against the Infant's life, the first great persecution is at hand. But the angels are still hovering around the Child to protect His weakness and allow Him to fulfil His tragic and glorious destiny. They warn the kings " in a dream that they should not return to Herod," and they depart for their own country without going through Jerusalem.

Such is the simple episode which, more than any other perhaps in the whole Gospel, stimulated the imagination of the great painters. It corresponds in the story of Christ's childhood to the entrance into Jerusalem in the story of His active life. It is the supreme moment of glory when, for once, the Son of God receives the homage due to Him at all times. It is the fugitive climax of happiness during which humble and wise, rich and poor, East and West, are reconciled, and as the triumph at the

gate of Jerusalem precedes the Passion, it precedes the flight into Egypt and the massacre of the Innocents.

Along the silent roads leading to Arabia or to Persia, Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar, as tradition calls them, returned to their respective kingdoms. Their heart was full of the vision of the Child they had left behind. They rejoiced in the fulfilment of the promise that they had expected for so long. They went back satisfied, for they had seen the King of kings, lying in the arms of a poor woman. They rejoiced; some say they sang on the way; but the star no longer guided their steps.

# CHAPTER VIII

# THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

## CHAPTER VIII

### *THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE*

IF we follow St. Matthew's story, we should now deal with the flight into Egypt. As explained above, we have, however, first to come back to St. Luke's text referring to the presentation in the Temple, which is the sequence adopted by all primitive painters in the series of frescoes or paintings devoted to the childhood of Christ.

In order to combine the two stories we must suppose that the visit of the magi took place during the forty days of the purification, after which the Child was brought to Jerusalem " to present him to the Lord; as it is written in the law of the Lord."

Joseph and Mary followed scrupulously the old law established for the Jews by Moses. The evangelists never tire of insisting on this observance of the old law, and Christ himself declared explicitly that he had come to " fulfil the law," not to destroy it. The links between the Old and the New Testament can be traced in every verse of this part of the Gospel. It is not only that the evangelists are anxious to show that the coming of the Lord was accompanied by all the incidents mentioned in the old prophecies, but also that they want to impress upon us the constructive character of the Christian Faith. When a good rule or a good law has been established through the inspiration of God, it is left to men to interpret it. Some of them, who may be very learned in this law, and whose hearts have been hardened by the pride they take in their virtuous attitude towards the world,

follow the letter of the law, not its spirit. Such was the attitude of the Pharisees, who were the most bitter enemies of Christ, and persecuted Him ceaselessly up to the foot of the Cross and even in His tomb. They were not necessarily evil-minded men, and some of them, no doubt, imagined that they were serving God by fighting a new prophet who dared to interpret the law in a different way and to build upon its foundations a new Church. They could not, or would not, realize that the long-expected Messiah, instead of strengthening their power, could possibly devote His energies to preach a Gospel of meekness and charity which placed the poor and unlearned on the same level as themselves, and softened the rigidity of certain prescriptions by an overwhelming and ever-forgiving love.

Such is really the conflict between the Christian and the Pharisee, but it must not lead us to think either that Christ rejected the old law or that all those who were devoted to the old law rejected Christ.

"And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel . . . and it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, . . . then took he Him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said . . ."

This does not mean simply that Simeon was righteous in a general way, but that he observed scrupulously the law. Some say that he was connected with the Temple. He represents the good man of the old law who, unlike the Pharisees, was humble enough not to determine beforehand the intentions of God and the circumstances of the coming of the Messiah, but who, led by a generous and open mind, was able to recognize Him, even when

Photo by Alinari

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

BY GIOTTO

*(Arena Chapel, Padua)*

He appeared to him carried in the arms of a poor woman. He took Him into his arms as the old law ought to have embraced the new if its eyes had been open. It is true that his greeting of Jesus comes after that of the shepherds and the kings, but this circumstance does not make it less wonderful and eloquent. His great prayer, the *Nunc Dimittis*, is repeated daily in every church, and is only equalled by the *Magnificat* (Mary's answer to Elisabeth during the Visitation) and by the angelic salutation to Mary.

Giotto's interpretation of the scene is perhaps the most striking example of his power of conveying words with a look or a simple gesture. One feels that the venerable old man looks upon the little Child as upon the fulfilment of a wonderful promise, for which he has never ceased to strive and to work during all the days of his life. He holds Him carefully, not even daring to touch His body with his hands, and looks and looks intently, feeding his yearning soul with the blessed sight: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel."

It has been suggested that the Child was struggling in Simeon's arms in order to go back to the Virgin. It seems rather as if Giotto had seized the moment when, after his speech, Simeon was handing back the Child to His Mother, with a last long look in his eyes. The left arm of the Child is still resting on his shoulder, and Mary stands prepared to receive her precious burden. An angel, flying above, witnesses the scene, as in practically all the episodes relating to Christ's childhood, the old painters insisting on the watchfulness of the Father's messengers over the first hesitating steps of His Child in the world. The pigeons or turtle-doves brought by Joseph as an offering are mentioned by St. Luke, and afford

a new sign of the poor conditions in which the parents found themselves. Any rich man, according to the law, would have brought a lamb. All the animals associated with Christ's childhood are the humblest and most peaceful in all creation: the sheep and the lambs of the shepherds, the patient ox, the long-enduring ass, and the gentle doves. Again, we may wonder at the simple dignity of Giotto's composition and at his art of expressing so much with such simple means. The central tabernacle and the altar suffice to indicate the interior of the temple. The group of Simeon with the Child and Anna on the right balances the group of Mary, Joseph, and the attendant on the left, while the sweeping lines of Mary's and Simeon's draperies lead our eyes to the Child towards whom the faces and the looks of all the characters of the scene are turned.

Simeon blessed both Joseph and Mary, but, when moved by the prophetic spirit, addressed the Mother alone, for Mary alone will witness the Passion: "Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Up till then, the trial of the Passion had only been suggested by the gift of myrrh brought by the youngest of the magi. It is left to Simeon, who was better acquainted with the political and religious position prevailing in Jerusalem at the time, to tear the veil of the future, and reveal the tragic truth—namely, that Jesus was going to be the cause of great divisions in Israel, that many should fall for not acknowledging Him, and that few should rise by following Him. The soul of Mary should be pierced by the sword, as the body of her Child by the nails of the Crucifixion, and the blood of her soul should flow with the blood of His body, in order "that the thoughts of many hearts should be revealed." For

the Passion was the cause of Judas's betrayal and of Peter's denial, but also of Mary Magdalene's vision, and of the Apostles' stubborn faith. It was then the great test of courage and character, as it is still to-day for every one of us. For Christianity is the only religion which founded its spiritual triumph on the wreckage of all its worldly hopes.

" And there was one Anna, a prophetess . . . of the tribe of Aser: she was of great age . . . and she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem." She carries in her hand a scroll on which is written: " Quoniam in isto, erit redemtio seculi " (Since in Him shall be the redemption of the race). Simeon announces the Passion, Anna the Redemption, fruit of the Passion. Simeon represents the pious Jew belonging to the two faithful tribes of Judah and Benjamin; Anna, the pious Israelite, belonging to the tribe of Aser, one of the ten tribes which seceded from Jerusalem at the time of Rehoboam, son of Solomon.

By now, representatives of the whole world have rendered homage to the Child, and testified of His divinity—the Jews, the Gentiles, the rabbis, and the Israelites. The series of miracles proclaiming and confirming the coming of the Lord is also complete. Every age and both sexes are there. A Virgin (Mary), a married woman (Elisabeth), an old widow (Anna). The three women are equally moved by the prophetic spirit, so are Zacharias and Simeon and the kings themselves, whose gifts foreshadow Christ's destiny. All activities and trades have also their share in the action. The ignorant shepherds, the simple carpenter (Joseph), and the learned magi, those belonging to the

Temple and those outside the Temple. The old prophecies have been verified, new prophecies have been uttered under divine inspiration. The old tree of the law is at last blossoming, and the gales have not yet come which will scatter its fruit.

Thus, from the very beginning, the universal character of the Christian Faith is proclaimed by the evangelists. Christ was born for rich and poor alike, for shepherds and for kings, for the Jews and for the Gentiles, for the privileged tribes and for the Israelites, for the men of all ages, of all creeds, of all trades. Even when His hand is not large enough to hold an apple, His universal charity extends throughout the world. A few chosen men, in every class, have already recognized Him. He cannot call them to Him, for He is only a helpless Babe, but the Holy Ghost brings them to Him and the spirit of His Father hovers around Him like the bright angel in Giotto's serene blue sky.

# CHAPTER IX

# THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

## CHAPTER IX

### *THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT*

WE can now take up St. Matthew's story at the point where we left it—that is to say, when the magi, "warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod," had gone back direct to their own country. Herod, frustrated in his plans (he had evidently hoped that the magi would have given him innocently the whereabouts of the Child), decided to murder all the infants of the district. His instructions were, of course, kept secret, but, once more, an angel intervened, and appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying: "Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

It is worthy of notice that the angel appeared this time to Joseph, not to Mary, Joseph's divine mission being to protect the Child during His helpless years. The Incarnation of God in man is made more perfect by the contrast existing between the part of Mary, acting as mother, and Joseph, acting as father and taking the important decisions and the leadership, as far as active life is concerned. Joseph does not occupy the foreground in St. Luke, but St. Matthew gives him greater importance. An angel had already appeared to him in order to instruct him on the divine origin of the Child, and on the name he was to give Him (Matt. i. 21). It is Joseph again who, according to tradition, looks after the Virgin and provides for her needs during the journey

to Bethlehem at the time of the Nativity. He fills, no doubt with greater humility than an ordinary good father, but with as much patience and steadfastness, the part of the father in the Holy Family.

When children learn to worship Jesus, they must not only realize that God chose the frail vessel of a poor woman's babe for His supreme Incarnation, but they must learn that a woman was found noble enough to bring into the world a divine Child, and to look after Him, and that a man was found worthy of the tremendous responsibility of watching over them both. Whenever we think of the Child, we think also of motherhood and fatherhood and of the sacred bond of marriage. The Incarnation not only conferred on the human race the greatest privilege which was ever conferred upon it — that of embodying the Divine Spirit—but it exalted family life to the dignity of a sacrament.

Since the days of Bethlehem, of Egypt, and of Nazareth, the mothers and fathers, looking after their earthly children, not only fulfil the noblest of natural duties, but a task which amounts to an act of worship, since every child has become the image of the infant Jesus, while the relations between children and parents have become a parable of the relations between manhood and God, and the affection due to the father on earth stands only second, in every child, to that which he expresses, in his daily prayers, to our Father in heaven.

The type given to Joseph by the early Italian painters is worthy of notice. That he should be an aged man is in accordance with all the early traditions relating to the marriage of the Virgin, but the painters give him very energetic features and a remarkable likeness to Peter, as if they had tried to show that it did not need less strength of character to protect the first steps of Jesus in the

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

SCHOOL OF GIOTTO

*Photo by Alinari*

*(Lower Church, Assisi)*

world than to uphold the first efforts of His newborn Church. Like Peter, Joseph is essentially human, and not above certain weaknesses (he is seen asleep in the Nativity pictures, as Peter in the Garden of Olives), but he has also St. Peter's profound humility and extraordinary readiness to obey blindly the commands of God. He is not like St. John the mystic flower, nor like St. Paul the burning mouth, but like St. Peter he is the good servant, steady and strong, the rock on which the Church is built.

" When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night, and departed into Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod."

The choice of Egypt is foreshadowed by former prophecies. Egypt was a great centre of learning; it had played a prominent part in the history of the Jews. The old law had been founded at the time of the return of Israel from Egypt to Palestine; it was, therefore, fit that the new law should be preached after a similar return and similar persecutions.

It was a long journey, which could only be made slowly over difficult roads and through a barren country. It has, nevertheless, been transformed by popular imagination into one of the happiest incidents of Christ's childhood. Our illustration is not taken, this time, from Giotto's series of frescoes in Padua, but from another series of frescoes, equally remarkable, decorating the lower church of Assisi, erected in the fourteenth century over St. Francis's tomb. It was painted either by Giotto himself or by one of his ablest pupils.

The angelic influence is again made apparent, one angel flying straight ahead, while the other, turned towards the fugitives, points out the way.

Joseph, walking at the head of the ass, carries a bundle on his stick, while two attendants, also laden with provisions for the journey, walk behind.

The bending palm-tree, in the midst of the picture, suggests, no doubt, the miraculous help which, according to old stories, was given to the travellers by nature itself.

One day when, exhausted, they were suffering sorely from thirst, water sprang under their feet at the bidding of Christ, transforming the arid desert into a flowered meadow. Another day when they were threatened with hunger, a tree bent before them in order to allow them to pluck its fruit.

What would have been, under ordinary circumstances, a most painful exodus became thus an almost idyllic journey, during which the Holy Family, under Divine guidance, were able to overcome, without trouble, all natural obstacles, and to enjoy the friendliness of the inanimate world. From this point of view, the flight into Egypt forms the fourth episode of Jesus's childhood, adding the adoration of nature to that of the shepherds, of the kings, and of Simeon.

These stories have, of course, no foundation, but they show us the vivid faith with which the popular mind of early Christians endeavoured to explain and complete the all too short narrative of the Gospel. If they cannot be justified in fact, they must at least be distinguished from the artificial and superficial ornaments introduced by the Renaissance art. They do not alter, in the slightest degree, the spirit of the Gospel, and their tender fancies do not detract from the simple earnestness of the holy story.

" Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem . . . from two years old and under,

ET APERTIS THESAVRIS SVIS OBTVLERVT EI AVRVM THVS ET MIRRAM
NIQVE EGERVT INFILIOS IVDA EFVDERVT SANGVINE INOCENTE INTERRA SVA
HERODES OCCIDIT OMNES PVEROS QVI ERAT INBETHELEHEM

*Photo by Alinari*

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

BY FRA ANGELICO

*(San Marco, Florence)*

*p. 73*

according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men."

This last sentence certainly suggests that one year, at least, had elapsed between the Nativity and the flight into Egypt. It is often quoted by those who contend that the adoration of the magi occurred at a much later date than that of the shepherds. Herod, according to them, would not have found necessary, otherwise, to slaughter all the children under two years of age. One might, however, quote a good many instances in history when a tyrant, on the slightest and most unfounded suspicion, indulged in perfectly useless cruelties. Indeed, it is one of the most constant characteristics of tyranny to give way to ridiculous fear and try to allay it by frightfulness. Cruelty and cowardice walk hand in hand in this world; they manifest themselves by the massacre of the Innocents, at the time of Christ's birth, and by the trials and tortures inflicted upon Him at the time of His Passion. The same dread which provoked the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem prompts the hatred of Annas, Caiaphas and their followers, and that of the emperors who persecuted Christian martyrs.

Our illustration is taken from a series of small pictures on the life of Christ by Fra Angelico, now in San Marco, in Florence; it shows the king urging his rather unwilling soldiers to the dreadful task, which they are bound to accomplish by the dictates of discipline.

Strangely enough, Fra Angelico, who, painting nearly a century later, had lost a great deal of Giotto's dramatic power, was able to give us a far more impressive interpretation of the story than Giotto. The latter was manifestly hampered by the complexity of incidents required by the subject. Notice the contrast between the terrace on which Herod appears, with flowers growing in vases,

and well-trained vine, against a limpid blue sky, and the terrible scene in the foreground. The women, no doubt, have been trapped; the door, to the right, has been shut against them, and the soldiers are pouring in through the door on the left. It has been suggested that such scenes ought never to be described, and this certainly seems true when one thinks of the use made of this episode by later artists, who uselessly insisted on its horror; but, for Giotto and Fra Angelico and the artists of their time, painting was still teaching. The massacre could no more be missed from the wall than the verses dealing with it from the Bible. It filled a necessary part in the scheme of Christ's childhood, by revealing evil in its nakedness, typified by the tyrant, Herod, as opposed to the goodness of the shepherds, the magi, Simeon, and Anna.

Christ had come to redeem mankind from the sin prompted by Satan. Satan accepted the fight. The massacre is merely the first of his efforts, which are pursued through the temptation in the desert, the persecutions of the Pharisees, the treason of Judas, and only end with the ordeal of the Passion.

If it be asked why Jesus had to fly before Herod's soldiers, it may be answered that He only deliberately delivered Himself into the hands of His enemies when He knew that His hour had come and that His work on earth was accomplished.

The miracle of the Incarnation did not loosen Satan's hold on the hearts of men. Such a result could only be obtained through the great sacrifice. Till then, the Son of God, having adopted the form of man, with its natural weakness, had to adapt Himself to human circumstances, and to avoid danger rather than to fight. " Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than

twelve legions of angels ?" (Matt. xxvi. 53) says Christ to Peter in the Garden of Olives in the dreadful hour of His arrest. He might have said that and done that from the first, if His mission had been to conquer by force. But He had a far longer and more painful way to tread, for His mission was to conquer by love only.

# CHAPTER X

# CHRIST AMONG THE DOCTORS

## CHAPTER X

### *CHRIST AMONG THE DOCTORS*

IT is very much to be regretted that, while knowing at least some episodes of Christ's childhood, and being fully informed through the four Gospels of His active life and Passion, we should remain so ignorant concerning His boyhood.

He was still a babe when He was taken to Egypt, and He was thirty years of age when He began to preach. Between these two dates there is a wide gap, which we can only fill with a few verses of St. Matthew and the short episode in St. Luke, referring to the Child among the doctors.

We are not even helped much by popular legends. This lack of information is easy enough to understand. The Gospel writers want to record first of all Christ's teaching and sacrifice, which are the very basis on which His Church is formed. The references to His childhood are only made by St. Luke and St. Matthew, more to confirm Jesus' divine origin than to tell us the story of His life in chronological order. These references do not seem to be essential to the story, but rather to have been added as a sort of confirmation of its holy character. Although the Gospel gives us more than enough for our moral guidance, we cannot help feeling that a few more details on the formation and development of Christ's personality, from childhood to manhood, would have been of enormous educational value. Christ sanctified all the ages of man; it is part of the mystery of the Incarnation that the image of babe, boy, and man should be consecrated by His life.

Of the latter we know much, of the first we possess at least a few suggestive stories, but on the second we can glean but scant information; its very scarcity makes it more precious.

St. Matthew tells us (ii. 19) that, after Herod's death, an angel appeared to Joseph in Egypt, telling him to go back to the "land of Israel." And there is good reason to believe that the destination of the Holy Family, on their way back from Egypt, was Bethlehem, where the Child had been born and recognized by the shepherds and kings, and whose name was connected with the prophecies referring to Him.

When, however, Joseph heard that "Archelaus did reign in Judea, in the room of his father Herod," he was afraid to settle there, as he knew that the future King of the Jews would be sought there. Therefore, "being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside" and went to Nazareth, which had been his former home.

Nazareth was only a small village of Galilee, and the Galileans were looked upon with scorn by the pure Jews. "Nazarene" was, therefore opposed in derision to the title of King of the Jews on the inscription fixed on the Cross on Golgotha. A man of Nazareth could obviously not be the king expected by the Pharisees, who applied this term of contempt to the early Christians, who, in their turn, gloried in it.

Christ was born in Bethlehem, and was, through His mother's ancestry, a true son of David, but it was not His intention to use these titles in order to increase His power. He wanted to be acknowledged, not for the sake of old prophecies, but for His own merit and actions. Instead of appearing with the glamour of noble lineage and renowned origin, He disguised His Godhead under the veil of humble birth, spending His youth in a despised village. He was called, by His enemies, the son of a Galilean carpenter; His true birth was only revealed to His friends and disciples, who

understood His teaching, for knowledge and formal testimonies will only lead us to God after we have made a spiritual effort to listen to His voice; they only confirm our faith, but cannot awake it.

According to St. Luke also (ii. 39), the Holy Family settled in Nazareth. He tells us that every year Joseph and Mary took the Child to Jerusalem, at the Feast of the Passover, according to the law. This law applied to men only, and the fact that Mary and Jesus accompanied Joseph shows the zeal with which they fulfilled their religious duties, even at certain risks, considering that Judea had previously been avoided by them on account of possible persecutions.

We are told that, when Jesus was twelve years old—that is to say, when He had become a catechumen and was being instructed in the law, His parents took Him to Jerusalem " after the custom of the Feast." When the time came to return to Nazareth, the Child could not be found, but they, " supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day's journey." As, however, they could not discover Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances undertaking the same journey, " they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him." After three days " they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions." That is exactly what a catechumen should do.

The doctors preached in the Temple, and all the faithful were allowed to question them. But this time the pupil became the teacher, for, in the next verse, St. Luke tells us that " all that heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers." Further discussions between Jesus and the doctors during His active life show us how this might have come to pass.

More than once, Christ prefers to ask questions, particularly of His opponents, but they are, most of them, leading questions, suggesting more clearly His meaning than any well-ordered argu-

ment. No doubt some of these startling questions were asked by the Child, and the doctors being unable to give satisfactory answers, the Questioner was in His turn questioned, and amazed His audience by His answers.

This moment, when the Child reveals His miraculous wisdom, has usually been chosen by the old painters who illustrate the story. Jesus is represented sitting in the midst of the doctors, His right hand uplifted, while the old men who surround Him show evident signs of awe and wonder. Joseph and Mary appear, outside the circle, the Mother stretching out her hands in silent appeal. "And when they saw Him, they were amazed: and His mother said unto Him, Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us? behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing." We must, therefore, presume that, as soon as Jesus saw His parents, He stood up, left the circle of wondering sages, and came to them. His answer has often been misunderstood. "How is it that ye sought Me? wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?" Superficially, it may seem like a reproof, as if Jesus reproached His earthly parents, because they forgot His holy birth and His Divine mission, and because they disturbed Him in the fulfilment of it. Such an interpretation would not only be against the spirit of the Gospel, but would contradict the conclusion of the story, which shows Christ leaving the Temple without demur, and following His parents to Nazareth "being subject to them." This misunderstanding might have been avoided if a more accurate translation of the Greek text had been given. What Christ said was not that He must be about His Father's business, but that He must be about His Father's house—that is to say, in the Temple; and if He asks His parents why they sought Him so long, it was merely because He never realized that they could be anxious about Him, knowing that He must have found a safe

*Photo by Alinari*

JESUS RETURNS TO THE HOUSE OF HIS PARENTS

SCHOOL OF GIOTTO

*(Lower Church, Assisi)*

*p. 83*

haven in the Temple. Understood this way, the words seem to be uttered far more in self-justification than in reproach.

The illustration we have chosen, from the series of frescoes in Assisi, shows the Child leaving the Temple with His parents. This subject has not been treated nearly so often as Christ among the doctors, but it is more interesting, because it gives us a closer understanding of the relationship existing between the boy and His parents. Joseph evidently plays the part of the father in this intimate scene; he leads the way, turning back towards the Child, not in anger, but in reproach, for the anxiety He has caused them. The Boy, whose youth for once is not exaggerated in the illustration of this episode, meets His father's eyes, clinging to His gown as if to excuse Himself. " I did not know that I could give you cause for anxiety." The mother shows a wonderful serenity, in contrast with Joseph's worried expression; already she keeps these things in her heart. She is followed by three elderly women, no doubt some friends from Nazareth, or some relations, who helped the parents in their search for Jesus. Once more, the old artist affords us help in our understanding of the Gospel story; he insists not so much on the Divine character of the Child as on His perfect obedience and humility. His success in the Temple is merely a foreshadowing of the great sermons of His manhood. But, though He could not help tarrying in the Temple to hear, and even to speak Himself when questioned, Jesus is still a child, and, as a child, must submit His divinity to His parents' will, whether they understand Him or not.

It may seem strange that the only story, which has come to our knowledge, bearing on Christ's boyhood should exalt the virtue of obedience, whilst so often in His sermons He insists on the fact that our duty to our Heavenly Father must stand above all other duties. But, if we consider this question with

some attention, we shall soon realize why so much importance is given to obedience in this episode, and why St. Luke, not content with telling us that Jesus followed His parents without delay, states clearly that during all the time He spent in Nazareth "He was subject unto them."

If we cannot obey our earthly father during our youth, how can we expect to be able to obey our Heavenly Father when we have come of age? Surely the orders of parents are more easy to follow than the orders of God. Far less is asked of us, far less is expected. If our humility, if our obedience is untrained when we are only asked to walk, how can we ever expect to fulfil our task on the day when we shall be asked to run? It is no use to say that, as children, we do not understand some orders—and to oppose liberty to obedience. Liberty can only give us a false material freedom; it is through obedience and humility only that we can conquer spiritual freedom, and learn to follow the laws of our God who is enthroned in our own heart. We can only find ourselves if we lose ourselves. We can only feel free if our self is bound and fettered so completely that it cannot disturb or hinder our contact or relation with God.

If God Himself, therefore, incarnate in a Boy, obeyed His father Joseph so meekly, it is in order that all Christian earthly children should obey their true fathers. If Christ's divinity followed the orders of those who did not understand Him, it is in order that we should follow, as children, the steps of those who understand us, and, as men, the example of Jesus Himself, who gave us His humility as an armour against the world, and His obedience as the staff to lean upon on the steep and winding road leading us to salvation.

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